



Designing a Student-Led BFMAT: Learning, leadership and how we run the Trust

CEO Introduction

Over the last few years, we have been deliberately changing what it means to learn and work within BFMAT.

This has not been accidental, nor a reaction to short-term pressures. It is rooted in the commitments set out in our strategic goals, reinforced through our simple rules, and shaped by evidence and practice around student-led learning.

Much of this work has already changed us — how we talk about learning, development, leadership and culture. What has been less clear, to ourselves as leaders and to the wider organisations, is how these ideas fit together as a single, coherent direction. This document makes that direction explicit.

At its core, this work is about a single, sustained shift: moving from organisations designed around control and delivery to ones designed around agency, development and trust.

That shift is already visible in parts of our system. What is not yet consistent is the depth, discipline and protection of that direction when it comes under pressure from habit, workload or compliance-driven ways of working. This document sets out the next phase of that journey.

It is intentionally directional rather than operational. It does not prescribe initiatives, structures or timelines. Instead, it makes explicit the non-negotiable direction of travel and the design principles I will use to judge priorities, decisions and progress.

By 2029, BFMAT will be an organisation where:

- Students are active co-creators of their learning, with genuine influence over curriculum, culture and decision-making, and with the confidence, skills and agency to shape both their own futures and the communities they are part of.
- Staff operate with high levels of autonomy within clear parameters, experience strong trust and expectation, and work within a culture that prioritises continuous development, feedback and professional growth over compliance.
- The Trust is run in ways that ensure financial resilience, effective and highly regarded professional services, and decision-making that enables learning, development and good judgement rather than constraining it.
- We are able to grow in scale and reach — including welcoming new colleges and deepening collaboration — without diluting our values or ways of working, using growth to strengthen rather than stretch our capacity.
- Our partnerships, particularly with **Coventry University Group**, are embedded and visible — improving opportunities for students, strengthening professional learning and development for staff, and enabling the effective use of specialist expertise across finance, estates, people, digital and organisational development.

These are not abstract aspirations. They are the practical consequences of taking our Manifesto seriously.

Achieving this will require us to lead differently. In particular, it will require greater discipline about what we prioritise, what we stop, and where we choose to intervene. It will also require



us to use our Simple Rules explicitly and consistently — not as statements of intent, but as tools for decision-making.

The three strands that follow — **Students, Staff, and Finance & Professional Services** — describe what this direction means in practice. They are not separate strategies. Together, they articulate how a student-led, deliberately developmental organisation operates.

This is the direction I am asking leaders at all levels, and the wider organisation, to work within. The direction is fixed. How we get there will continue to be shaped collectively, guided by our values, our evidence and our commitment to doing this work well.

I also want to be explicit about a shift in how I am going to lead. As CEO, I will be more direct about where we are heading, even when the route is not fully mapped. That does not mean less trust or autonomy, or more control. It means providing clearer orientation in a complex system where certainty is impossible, but direction is not optional.

This direction is ambitious, and at times it will feel uncomfortable. That is intentional. Remaining where we are would be more familiar, but it would not be sustainable, and it would limit what students and staff can become. Discomfort here is not a sign that something has gone wrong; it is a signal that we are working at the right level.

Strand One: Students

Direction

Student-led learning is the organising principle of our work with students.

We are moving decisively away from models of education that position students primarily as recipients of teaching, assessment and institutional decision-making. Instead, students are expected to act as active agents in the design, delivery, management and evaluation of their learning and the wider learning environment.

This is not an enhancement to existing practice. It is a fundamental shift in how learning is conceived, structured and experienced across the Trust.

At its heart, this direction recognises that many of our students are already young adults. Our responsibility is not only to support success on courses, but to develop the judgement, capability and confidence they will need beyond them — in further study, in work and in life.

This requires us to move away from learning environments built around compliance, dependency or passive participation, and towards ones that expect students to think, decide and act with increasing independence. Student-led learning demands trust, professional discomfort and careful design — not control or standardisation.

If learning design reduces student agency, responsibility or judgement — regardless of intent or past effectiveness — it is misaligned with this direction.

In practice: an example

A group of students are agreeing how they will evidence their learning this half-term. They are working from the exam specification, clear about which criteria are fixed and where they have room to decide. They debate how best to demonstrate understanding, challenge one another's assumptions, and agree what "good" will mean in practice.

The teacher does not set the task. They question the choices being made, push for greater stretch, and hold the group to the standards the students themselves have named. When the group stalls later in the term, it is the students who adjust their approach — not because they are told to, but because responsibility for learning genuinely sits with them.

What people will experience day to day by 2029



- Students are actively involved in the **design, delivery and evaluation** of their learning, making informed choices about content, approach and evidence within clear academic and professional expectations — and living with the consequences of those choices.
- Students understand standards, assessment requirements and external expectations, and use them deliberately to plan, monitor and improve their learning, rather than working around them or relying on staff to direct the process.
- Learning feels demanding and purposeful: students are expected to make decisions, test ideas, review impact and adapt their approach over time — with staff acting as coaches and challengers who stretch judgement and standards rather than control activity.
- Responsibility for learning genuinely sits with students; they are used to initiating change, shaping provision and addressing problems, rather than waiting for issues to be fixed or decisions to be made for them.
- By the time students leave us, they see themselves as confident, curious and capable young adults — able to manage uncertainty, exercise judgement and intervene in the world around them to change it for the better.

What we will challenge

Within our Simple Rules, people should act with autonomy and confidence. The following are the things we will actively challenge when they pull us away from our direction.

- Learning that positions students as recipients rather than active contributors and decision-makers.
- Student voice without genuine influence over learning, culture, or decisions.
- Assessment practices that reward performance signals over meaningful learning and development.

Strand Two: Staff

Direction

Our staff are the primary enablers of a student-led, deliberately developmental organisation.

We are moving away from models of leadership and management that rely on control, oversight and individual heroics. Instead, we are building a culture where professional autonomy, accountability and development are expected and supported by design.

This means being explicit about where staff can act autonomously, where alignment is needed, and where escalation is genuinely required — so judgement is exercised rather than deferred.

This shift is not about lowering standards or stepping back from responsibility. It is about changing where responsibility sits, how capability grows, and how leadership is exercised across the organisation.

At its core, this direction is about enabling people to do their best work without pretence, unnecessary performance or unsustainable effort. We are explicit that sustainability is a professional responsibility, not a personal weakness. Work should be designed so that people can thrive over time, not cope or endure.

Leadership increasingly takes the form of coaching, challenge and reflection rather than instruction, rescue or control. Leaders are expected to create the conditions in which others can think, decide and act with confidence and judgement — and to be held accountable for doing so.



If leadership practices reduce autonomy, judgement or professional growth, they are misaligned with this direction, even if they feel efficient, reassuring or well-intentioned.

In practice: an example

A team reflects together on a piece of work that has not had the impact they hoped for. The conversation is open and candid. People name assumptions that proved unhelpful, identify decisions they would make differently next time, and agree what they will try instead.

There is no sense of blame or rescue. Accountability is present, but it is experienced as collective learning rather than individual fault. The focus is on strengthening judgement and practice, not on justifying decisions after the fact.

What people will experience day to day by 2029

- Staff experience high levels of autonomy within clear, shared parameters, and are trusted to exercise professional judgement rather than seek permission.
- Development is part of everyday work: feedback, coaching and challenge are normal, expected and generative — not remedial or performative.
- Less energy is spent managing impressions, navigating ambiguity or absorbing pressure on behalf of others; more energy is released for learning, collaboration and impact.
- People are able to show up as themselves at work, without needing to wear a mask to appear competent, busy or in control — because pretending and posturing are no longer rewarded.
- Leadership effectiveness is judged by the capability, confidence and judgement it grows in others, not by the volume of issues it personally absorbs.
- Work feels demanding but meaningful and sustainable, because it is aligned with purpose and designed for long-term effectiveness rather than endurance.
- As a consequence of these ways of working — not as a separate programme — it becomes possible to deliver excellent outcomes with fundamentally different patterns of work, including the genuine ambition of a **four-day working week without loss of pay**.

What we will challenge

Within our Simple Rules, people should act with autonomy and confidence. The following are the things we will actively challenge when they pull us away from our direction.

- Leadership practices that replace trust and judgement with control or permission-seeking.
- Systems that prioritise compliance, activity, or process over learning and development.
- Constraints on autonomy not clearly justified through Simple Rules or evidence of risk.

Strand Three: Finance & Professional Services

Direction

How we run the Trust matters as much as what we teach or how we develop people. The way money, professional expertise, systems and services operate either enables agency and growth — or quietly constrains them.

Our finances and professional services exist to enable student-led learning and professional development at scale. They should remove friction, make good decisions easier, poor decisions harder, and support work that is purposeful, sustainable and well-designed.

We are moving away from models where authority is concentrated, process is over-specified, and professional judgement is overridden by procedure. Instead, we are designing ways of working that expect competence, trust people to exercise judgement, and make accountability clear.



Professional services within BFMAT are exactly that: professional. These teams hold expertise, make decisions and carry responsibility in their own right. Their role is to work alongside colleagues as enabling partners in the shared work of running a complex organisation well.

Some of our most significant shifts will happen here first. Clearer decision rights, more distributed authority and genuinely self-managing teams are likely to emerge earlier in these areas than in more traditionally hierarchical parts of the system. This is not preferential treatment; it is a deliberate way of learning how to work differently, with discipline and accountability, before extending those patterns more widely.

Financially, this direction requires clarity and discipline. Resources are finite, trade-offs are real, and sustainability matters. We are designing financial and operational approaches that support long-term resilience, responsible growth and effective use of time, money and energy — rather than short-term optimisation or constant firefighting.

Where we have strategic assets — including our sponsorship by Coventry University and access to wider professional capability — we will use them deliberately and visibly, embedding that expertise into how the Trust operates so that students, staff and services all benefit.

If a system, process or service increases workload, obscures accountability or weakens professional judgement without a clear benefit to students or staff, it is misaligned with this direction.

In practice: an example

A cross-functional group is working through a decision about how to resource a new piece of work. The financial parameters are clear, and so are the expectations around quality and sustainability. No one is waiting for approval from “above”, and no one is hiding behind process.

Different perspectives are brought into the room early — finance, estates, IT, people — not to sign things off, but to shape the decision together. Trade-offs are named openly. Someone challenges whether the work is genuinely aligned with current priorities. Another proposes stopping something else to create capacity.

The decision is made close to the work, with accountability clearly held. What matters is not whether every step followed a template, but whether judgement was exercised well and the outcome strengthens the system rather than adding strain.

What people will experience day to day by 2029

- People are clear about who owns decisions and where accountability sits, so work moves without repeated escalation, duplication or delay.
- Finance and professional services are experienced as enabling partners — involved early, bringing expertise, shaping decisions and removing friction rather than acting as gatekeepers at the end.
- People experience professional services teams as places where decisions are owned collectively, work moves without constant approval, and responsibility is genuinely shared
- Systems and processes make sense to the people using them, so less time is spent navigating requirements and more time is spent exercising judgement and getting meaningful work done.
- Financial conversations are open and honest, with trade-offs named early rather than absorbed quietly or deferred until they become problems.
- Time, money and energy are treated as precious; work that adds strain without clear value is questioned, redesigned or stopped.
- The Trust feels resilient rather than brittle: able to grow, adapt and collaborate — including drawing confidently on Coventry University Group's expertise — without work becoming slower, heavier or more fragmented.



What we will challenge

Within our Simple Rules, people should act with autonomy and confidence. The following are the things we will actively challenge when they pull us away from our direction.

- Financial decisions that trade long-term resilience for short-term relief or reassurance.
- Processes that create friction, delay or unnecessary escalation rather than enabling good judgement.
- Growth that stretches capacity, culture or professional capability beyond what can be responsibly sustained.

A final thought

This document is not an endpoint; it is a shared reference point for judgement, decision-making and action.

The direction it sets will require us to make real choices, to surface trade-offs, and to stop or redesign work that pulls us away from where we are heading. It asks us to tolerate uncertainty, to stay with discomfort, and to hold one another to high standards of agency, professionalism and care — not as an aspiration, but as a daily practice.

None of this can be delivered by mandate. It depends on leaders at all levels using this direction to guide priorities, design work and shape conversations — and on all of us taking responsibility for how the system operates, not just for our individual roles within it.

Designed well, this way of working shifts sustainability out of individual effort and into the system itself. Over time, it opens up the possibility of fundamentally different patterns of work — including ambitions such as a four-day working week — not as a separate programme or promise, but as a consequence of better design, stronger judgement and greater agency.

The prize is not comfort or consensus. It is an organisation that is confident enough to think, disciplined enough to choose, and capable enough to grow its impact — for students, for staff, and for the wider sector we are part of.

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